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Guy Wisdom

Pin Up the Red Ribbon

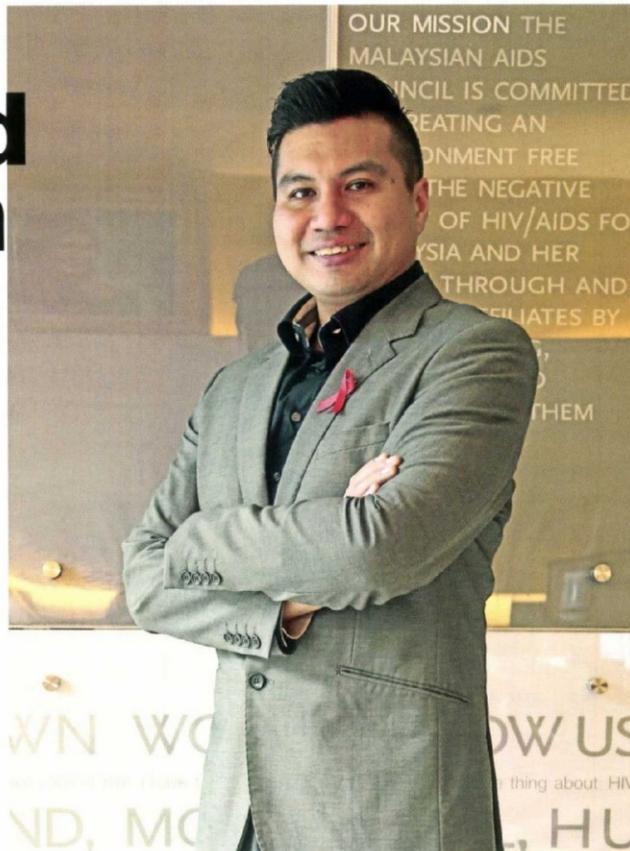
Dr Ilias Yee's involvement with the Malaysian AIDS Council has given him a keen insight into HIV and AIDS research, and sexual health. He talks about the challenges involved and values that he lives by each day.

"A LOT OF PEOPLE HAVE SEX.

It's just that we don't talk about it enough, and that's the root of all problems."

Dr Ilias Yee, assistant honorary secretary of the Malaysian AIDS Council, is giving his frank assessment of the obstacles linked to HIV and AIDS prevention in Malaysia when he touches on stigma and prejudice, two variables that can sometimes be more crippling than the virus or disease itself. He describes what the lack of discussion and transparency does, saying, "Stigma comes out of that when people start discriminating and creating all sorts of myths and fallacies." He points out that even though HIV is difficult to spread due to its precise modes of transmission—sharing of contaminated blood products and instruments, having unprotected sex, and between mother to child (either during pregnancy, labour or breastfeeding)—most people remain ignorant, "I've encountered individuals who thought that you can get HIV from mosquitoes."

Dr Yee explains how he'd gotten involved with HIV and AIDS work in Malaysia, citing that the undersupply of good services had first gotten his attention, "When one ventures into this field, there's so much opportunity and a lot of



people you can help." He touches on the importance of motivation, saying, "I see things above the conflict and tension. There's a vision, which is much higher than that, and we all want to work towards the common goal." He acknowledges that he's experienced some degree of discrimination by medical practitioners from different fields; they question what he does and even ask when he's going to practise so-called "real" medicine as a bulk of his responsibilities include giving talks to create HIV and AIDS awareness.

Driven by the vision and commitment to the cause, he highlights that it's always your outlook towards issues that ultimately make a difference, "I go to bed quite peacefully at night. Didn't always use to be the case, but nowadays, I see that there's no point worrying or being anxious because the problems are still going to be there the next day. You

might as well approach it with a clear mind and be at peace."

According to Dr Yee, when your career revolves around a humanitarian cause your personal gains become secondary. He shares a couple of principles that guide him, saying, "It's about adding value and preferably taking a route that allows everyone to win." He elaborates that in his line of work, it's vital to be inclusive and nonjudgemental, "It's so easy to stereotype someone, but the important thing is to actually pause and be aware that every single person is different—let it be drug users, sex workers, transgenders or men who have sex with men. Everyone goes through life with their unique experiences; the whole important aspect is to be emphatic and understand everyone's context of life. Every single person is a new discovery."



TRANSFORM THE WAY YOU THINK AND PLAY SAFE.

BE WARY OF BIAS

"Once we think we understand something, we fix our minds to it. We make a belief around it even though that's not the actual reality. So take a step back, ask questions—and keep on questioning things. The perceived reality may not be the actual reality. Again, what's important is to have your values set up to it."

ALTER YOUR MINDSET

"HIV is everyone's problem. It's not a gay problem, a drug user's problem or a sex worker's problem. It's a problem for anyone who engages in risky behaviour across the board. What this means is that as long as you've had unprotected sex with someone else, that's risky behaviour."

GET YOURSELF TESTED

"You can't tell if you have HIV by signs, symptoms, looks or Google. The only way you can know for sure is by getting yourself tested—that's the sure way of getting it done. You can test anywhere you're comfortable with: Go to a government facility and get tested for free or see your private clinician."

REDUCE RISKS

"Harm reduction is all inclusive and about minimising risk at every point. People are going to have sex regardless, so take the precaution by creating awareness about protection. Make condoms readily available. Pleasure is important in sex, but it's also about having safe pleasure all the time—condoms are an absolute must."

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